

# Chow Line

News from the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences

## The difference between flu, foodborne illness

**I didn't think I had ever had food poisoning until I read recently that many people mistake it for the flu. How can you tell the difference?**

This isn't surprising. Many people believe they've been untouched by foodborne illness, yet the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 48 million Americans, or 1 in 6, become ill due to food poisoning every year. What's more, 128,000 become sick enough to be hospitalized, and 3,000 die.

Still, there's a reason the most common type of foodborne illness, norovirus, is typically called the "stomach flu." Norovirus actually isn't a flu bug at all — it's an entirely different type of virus that can be spread through contaminated food, water and surfaces as well as person-to-person contact.

Norovirus attacks the gastrointestinal tract, while influenza is a respiratory illness. The most common symptoms of norovirus are diarrhea, vomiting, nausea and cramping or stomach pain, with some people also experiencing low-grade fever, chills, fatigue, headache and body ache similar to the flu. Compare that list with the symptoms of influenza and you'll see quite a bit of overlap: With the flu, you'll normally experience fever or feverish chills, a cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, muscle or body aches, headache and fatigue, and some people may also have vomiting and diarrhea.

The flu and foodborne illness also have other similarities. Most people experience only mild illness (although it may not seem so at the time), and get better on their own. People most at risk from both types of viruses include people who are 65 and older, people with chronic medical conditions such as asthma, diabetes or heart disease, pregnant women, and young children.



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In addition, both viruses can be spread person to person, and both are more common in late fall, winter and early spring.

Norovirus can spread quickly. According to the CDC, you can get it by:

- Eating food or drinking liquids that are contaminated with norovirus.
- Touching surfaces or objects with norovirus on them and then putting your hand or fingers in your mouth.
- Having direct contact with a person who is infected.

To reduce your risk:

- Wash your hands with soap and water carefully for 20 seconds or more before rinsing, especially after using the bathroom, changing diapers, and before eating or preparing food. Currently available alcohol-based hand sanitizers have not been proven to be very effective against the human norovirus. Use hand sanitizers only when hand-washing facilities are not available.
- Carefully rinse fruits and vegetables, and cook oysters and other shellfish thoroughly.
- If you're sick, don't prepare food for others while you have symptoms and for at least two days afterwards.
- Clean and disinfect contaminated surfaces and laundry thoroughly.

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**Editor:** This column was reviewed by Sanja Ilic, Ohio State University Extension specialist in Food Safety.

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